

TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN FOOTBALL: THE SPECIALISED SAMPLING MODEL

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Introduction

Optimizing the learning environment for young players is crucial within talent development in football. According to this, there is an extensive debate on the specificity of practice in the context of early sport participation up to 12 years of age. Is it beneficial to specialize in one sport-specific domain or does sampling through several kinds of sport lead to superior experiences (Côté and Erickson, 2015)? Asking Swiss junior national team (JNT) players, Zibung and Conzelmann (2013) have shown that a sport-specific focus within early sports participation induces a superior senior skill level. However, as only around 0.2% per cent of players are able to reach JNT levels, it would be interesting if early sport-specific practice also boosts the chances to even participate in this important elite development program.

Methods

By means of retrospective questionnaires 294 regional players (57 JNT players within; 19.4%) have been questioned about their early sport participation up to 12 years of age. Using the amount of in-club practice, free play (both in football), sports activities besides football and the age at initial club participation, a hierarchical and partitioning cluster analysis was executed. Afterwards transitions to JNT have been counted and compared to expected transitions (Fisher Test; $p < .05$) for each cluster.

Results

A five-cluster solution was identified. Whilst football abstainers (0.4-fold chance; $p = .02$) with less practice had a reduced chance, football enthusiasts (2.0; $p = .03$) with a high amount of sport-specific practice (in-club and free play) moved to JNT at a significantly increased number. In between club players (1.5; $p = .05$), average players (0.9; $p = .31$) and poly-sportive players (0.8; $p = .42$) do not show any differences from random transitions.

Discussion

On overall, we conclude that the chance for a selection to JNT increases with the amount of sport-specific practice. However, this is no claim for focused deliberate practice. In contrary: The football enthusiasts with a huge amount in free play support the hypothesis that a broad range of forms (e.g. futsal, beach soccer etc.) and settings (e.g. free play, coach-led practice etc.) within early sport-specific football practice may lead to superior performance in the later career. As this is in line with the renewed understanding of the sampling hypothesis, which states that sampling is also possible within one sport-specific domain (Côté and Erickson, 2015), we claim a new insight: the specialized sampling model.

References

Côté, J, Erickson, K (2015). Handbook of Sport Expertise, 305-316. Florence: Routledge.

Zibung M, Conzelmann A (2013). Eur J Sport Sci, 13(5), 452-460.

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